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The Achievement of the Centuries

ADDRESS OF THE PRESIDENT

DELIVERED AUGUST 1, 1921
AT
THE TERCENTENARY CELEBRATION
OF THE
LANDING OF THE PILGRIMS
AT
PLYMOUTH



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PRESENTED BY MR. LODGE
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ADDRESS.

GOVERNOR COX AND FELLOW AMERICANS: Though they seem comparatively measureless to us, three centuries are little more than a moment in the chronicle of human history. Christianity is now rounding out its twentieth century, and there is no comprehensible measure to the human ferment which went before. Our actual national life is less than half the period of marvelous New World development, the tercentenary of which beginning we celebrate but in that little while the achievement is the most significant of all the centuries. It is not too much to say that the three centuries which have passed since men of our race came here to found a new State have been the most momentous and the most pregnant in all the progress of humankind.

They were more swiftly moving and seemingly more vital than the much longer periods of Egyptian, Greek, or Roman civilizations with which we are familiar, and it is not impossible that the commanding potency of progress and material possessions may turn the significant beginning at Plymouth into surpassing influence in the making of human history.

To this and the Virginia shore were transplanted the seeds of representative democracy, the new ideals of nationality through association and representation, and there has developed seemingly, the most dependable form of popular government ever witnessed in the world. Perhaps this larger achievement was not intended by the heroes of colonization. They were seeking freedom and found nationality essential to its preservation. Destiny pointed the way, and the hand of divinity traced the course of God-intended human advancement. Here came the sturdy English middle class of yeomanry, burghers, and squires, who clung to their ideals of representative government. At home they might have been crushed under the burdens which reaction was seeking to impose. Here they could have free play and begin anew, and fashion the temple of freedom in a new land, and they began what we call republican institutions. These institutions are the agencies of highest freedom which embody at once the centralized authority strong enough to hold together a great community, and those essentials of democracy which insure dominance to the intelligent will of a free people.

Whether we reflect upon the restraints upon freedom which the fathers imposed, or measure the broader liberty under the law of to-day, here began the reign of dependable public opinion, which unfaillingly is the law of highest civilization. One may not say whether the Puritans at home would have been able to work out

such a system if there had been no American colonies and the colonial influence to react upon the mother country. Doubtless the English revolution, which came soon after the settlement at Plymouth, would have come even had there been no settlement here, no Massachusetts Bay Colony, no Virginia plantation. But it is easy to believe that in the long struggle after the restoration, the fruits of the revolution, the strengthened parliamentary institutions, and the restrictions on royal prerogative were helped by the influences of colonial democracy.

It is a difficult task to single out and measure the factors in political and social progress. The germ of progress is doubtless universal, but requires favorable conditions for its development. Conditions were favorable in the New World and the Plymouth Colony was destined to begin the surpassing story of three centuries of ardent, eager pursuit of human justice.

No one will ever dispute the large part New England played in the rearing of new standards of freedom. The early struggles here were contemporaneous with the making of modern British constitutionalism, and the New World beacon was an incentive and an inspiration across the sea; and to-day Old World and New join in rejoicing at the ends achieved. Here, with crude narrowness and unconscious selfishness hindering, but with supreme intent impelling, there developed the accepted plan of emancipating humanity, and the grant to man to shape his own destiny. The world choruses to-day rejoicing in maintained democracy, attuned its chord to the notes first sounded here.

This development of liberty, this great conception of freedom, took ever firmer hold, until it was held and voiced unceasingly by those who bore aloft its banners here. And there was significant reflex in the motherland. No Englishman will do his country full justice or will quite understand its human story who does not seek out and study the effects of this sympathy and interaction between the seasoned, age-old liberalism of the English countryside and the new, eager, out-reaching aspiration of those who were planting the seed here in a fresh soil and guarding its early development. No American can fully appraise his country's contribution to mankind's advance if he overlooks these things which were truly fundamental in creating two towers of national strength for freedom where there might have been but one. At a time when the restored House of Stuart was bent on breaking up the New England confederacy, esteeming it a league for ultimate independence, the enemies of Charles II were the firm friends of New England. The confederacy was at length destroyed, but it had served to teach the colonists unity and cooperation. Thus there was laid the foundation, in public opinion and working experience, of the confederation which afterwards brought together the thirteen Colonies in the revolutionary struggle, and later the Federal Union.

At a time when the Commons at Westminster seemed impotent against the demand of the returned Stuarts, the King sent his demand that the Massachusetts charter be surrendered. The beginning of American Revolution may fairly be traced the larger part of a century from the date we commonly fixed for it to the great town meeting in the South Church, to which was submitted

the question whether the colony would assent to the charter reorganization that the King demanded. Those who voted to accept the royal terms were called on to raise their hand; and no hands were shown! The charter, indeed, was later revoked; but the unified and incensed colony was already in a state of semirevolt. The fundamental grants of other colonies were in turn withdrawn and the King undertook to bring them all together under a single administration which should hold them in closer leash and keep the royal eye carefully on their activities. He foresaw already that the colonies were disposed to stiff-necked defiance of him and that they were tending to come together and make common cause; and he saw, too, that that common cause was more and more appealing to the sympathy of Liberals at home.

If the idea of religious freedom had little to hope for from the effort of the stern old fathers to set up a theocracy in New England, the ideal of political freedom found here a particularly fertile soil in which to germinate. If we candidly will examine the period of the Stuart restoration we will find more than one of England's political tyrants insisting on a wider measure of religious tolerance in these colonies. Ultimately, under the Crown insistence, the franchise was widened by placing it on a property-holding basis rather than on that of church communion. It was a distinct liberalization, a significant broadening of the civic foundation. If a Stuart king took from these colonies the right to choose their own governors, he also undertook to forbid those excesses of religious zeal which led to persecutions for conscience' sake.

In short, there is some justification for the generalization that the political tyrants of the restoration forced a religious freedom on a colonial community whose dominating minority did not want it, while the Colonies wrested political freedom from the Crown. The clash between a theocratic tyranny on this side and a political tyranny on the other resulted in the destruction of both, to the vast betterment of every human interest involved. It was a long, stubborn, determined struggle between forces, neither of which had much capacity for yielding or compromise. In one way or another, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously, it was going on practically throughout the entire period from the beginning of the colony at Plymouth to the end of the Revolutionary War and the recognition of independence. Looking back upon it, we may say that it was inevitable, and that the end which came to it was an inevitable conclusion. But things which look inevitable in the retrospect, conclusions which seem inescapable when the long scroll of developing events can be unrolled before the mind's eye, are never so apparent during the process of their evolution. That manifest destiny whose directing hand we discern when we survey the long processes of history would doubtless have brought at last the happy state of both political and religious freedom. But without that cooperation of forces, that reaction of influences between the old England and the new, we may well doubt whether the light of the new day would have broken through to shine upon the better fortunes of an emancipated race without a struggle longer, by generations, perhaps by centuries, than that which history records.

The men and women who came here to found in a wilderness, across a thousand leagues of ocean waste, a new State, came with high and

conscious purpose of achieving a great human end. Out of their voluminous letters, memoirs, public records, and historical writings we constantly get the impression of their deep conviction that they had been called as divine instruments to accomplish a work of supremest significance. Some have seen in this nothing more than the basis for an indictment on the ground of zealotry, bigotry, even fanaticism. But bigotry, extremism, fanaticism never found their fruition in noble ends achieved, in freedom established, in mankind emancipated, in great States raised up as guardians, unshackled thought and unchained souls. We will find no philosophy based on such unworthy assumptions which will explain the miracle that was here performed. We will have to look higher, to see more clearly, to deal more fairly with human nature, to estimate more generously the purpose of those whom generations of men have honored. No merely human philosophy is capable of explaining such marvels as these. But when we lift our eyes we will recognize the supreme guidance, the divine inspiration, which alone could have wrought these ends.

Hand of man alone did not build what was founded here; it was but the visible sign, the human symbol of a purpose, which we may not understand but for whose beneficence all men must give tribute of praise and voice undying gratitude. We may speculate and conjecture, we may seek to frame laws of human relationship by which to account for such results as here have been wrought, but at last we will have to recognize that they are not for us to explain.

Even Cromwell, in his great leadership, failed to understand. He spoke contemptuously of those whom he accused of running away from the struggle at home. "Pinched fanatics," he proclaimed these fathers of freedom in half a world. It would be difficult to find more convincing proof that human judgments are not to be trusted in these affairs wherein a higher than human wisdom directs the destinies of men and nations. Cromwell lived to know he had erred in his estimate of men and motives, but it was not given to him to know how stupendous was his mistake. He did not live to realize that the schism he deplored was to be the means of winning liberty for both countries, and to bring them at last into that glorious union of free men's energies which in our day has saved a world from reaction and despotism.

There has never lived a generation of men possessing such wealth of historic materials, such capacity for candid analysis, such broad experience to guide them in right determination, as the generation to which we belong. Likewise there has been none which confronted more complex and difficult problems. Therefore, I like to commend study of the history which began here at Plymouth, in its relations to the sweep of modern affairs. It teaches us that sometimes schism may lead to true solidarity; that division may mean multiplication.

The English-speaking race had hardly established itself in its true character as the foremost exponent of liberal institutions, when it began to distribute itself among the wildernesses of the earth. Even before liberty had been secured for the mother country, its soldiers were adventuring into distant parts, carrying their ambitions with them. Cromwell looked upon them as deserters, despised them as weaklings, was disgusted with himself for having once thought to unite with them. It was not an unnatural or a

far-fetched judgment for one of the Cromwellian habit. But what would have been his amazement if he could have foreseen the destiny that awaited this feeble colonial enterprise, if he could have known that here was being founded the community that would at last inspire the forces of Old-World liberalism if he could have looked down the vista of three centuries and seen political division followed by spiritual reunion in the greater cause of liberty for all mankind?

The community of free people of our race, whether in Europe or America, in Africa or Australia, under the northern or the southern skies—whether held together by political ties or by the yet more potent bonds of common traditions, institutions, language, and blood—this community, spread now to all quarters of the world, was begun when Jamestown and Plymouth were founded. It has carried its ideals wherever it has set its standard. It has won recognition of these ideals as the basis of social conduct, of community relations, throughout the world. Its work is not finished; but, pray God, it has come triumphantly through its determining ordeal. It comes forth from that test, nerved and heartened for further tasks, confident, assured, reliant. None questions either its place or its right of leadership: few doubt its destiny to establish, under that divine guidance which it has ever recognized, the splendid structure of human brotherhood in peace and understanding.

The perspective of history are not safely to be judged save from the loftiest peaks of human experience. It is the dearly bought privilege of our generation to stand on one of those heights of the long ages, to look back over the pathways by which we have come thus far, to see clearly what have been the main traveled roads and what the by-paths. If we will but let our minds record that which our eyes tell us, we will note that the widespreading landscape behind us is now vastly changed. It is not what it seemed when we were passing through it. A little time ago, from a lower altitude, we looked back on this same sweep and missed much that is now clear-cut and plain. That was before the storm. Then the clouds obscured the heights. Dense fogs of ignorance bedimmed the view. There were poisoned vapors of prejudice and the miasmas of intolerance. Now, in this wider, clearer vision we see that some of the routes which we supposed were the high roads of progress were the futile ways of wasted effort. Others, which in the journey's heat and toil we counted only as its marches of anguish, we recognize as the short-cuts that carried us quickly to loftier levels and safer positions.

We stand to-day before the unknown, but we look to the future with confidence unshaken. There is no retracing, we must forever go on. We welcome the theories wrought out in new hope, but we cling to the assurance founded on experience. All that is—is not bad, all that is to be will not be ideal. We can not lift the veil to the future, but we can analyze and understand what has gone before. It is good to keep our feet firmly on the earth though we gaze in high hope for human brotherhood and high attainments.

Just as the Pilgrims had a practical mind for material things amid effective pursuit of their higher ideals, so must we with our inheritance. God never intended an achievement without great effort—there is no reward without great labor. Freedom is the field of endeavor, not the fancied abode of idleness.

Just as these fathers drew together toward ample community authority to make the Nation and still preserve the freedom of those who compose it, so must we guard against the supreme centralization of power at home, and the superstate for the world. More, we must combat the menace in the growing assumption that the state must support the people, for just government is merely the guaranty to the people of the right and opportunity of that people to support themselves. The one outstanding danger of to-day is the tendency to turn to Washington for things which are the tasks or the duties of the forty-eight Commonwealths which constitute the Nation. Having wrought the Nation as the central power of preservation and defense, let us preserve it so.

A new hope looms to-day. We are slowly but very surely recovering from the wastes and sorrows and utter disarrangements of a cataclysmal war. Peace is bringing its new assurances; and penitent realization and insistent conscience will preserve that peace. Our faith is firmer that war's causes may be minimized, and overburdening armament may be largely diminished. And these, too, without surrender of the nationality which has inspired or the good conscience which has defended. The international prospect is more than promising, and the distress and depression at home are symptomatic of early recovery. Solvent financially, sound economically, unrivaled in genius, unexcelled in industry, resolute in determination, and unwavering in faith, these United States will carry on!

In the story of 300 years there is every recompense for the agonies of yesterday, there is our staff for the burdens of to-day, there is our assurance for the trials of to-morrow. The civilization of to-day, the status of mankind, has been reached by many routes. We have approximated the common vision, the united purpose, the one supreme aim. We note the divisions of the past, the parting paths, the clashing ambitions, the misguided efforts, and we see all of them bringing men together and urging understanding, suggesting larger purpose. There is no fit temple for man amid eternal rivalries, enmities, hatreds, strife, and warfare. But in the concord of brotherhood and understanding we may approach the state which God must have meant for those created in his own image.

Here was the early dedication to religious liberty and political freedom. It was a sublime gift to posterity. We can not better express our reverence to-day than by sweeping aside the errors, the failures, the disappointments, the betrayals of our day, and plant here for all America and all the world the standards of highest justice and real human brotherhood. This would add to the volume of rejoicing on earth and give echo to the heavens of the nobler aspiration of united mankind. It would dim no torch of liberty which was lighted here, but would set the world aglow with new hopes, new confidence, and new exaltation.



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